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ABSTRACT

Two installments of "Young Adult Literature" are presented in this compilation. "Young Adult Literature," which offers reviews of young adult books, is a regular feature of the National Council of Teachers of English publication, "Notes Plus." The articles included in this compilation give favorable reviews to two novels and two autobiographies. The books are: (1) "A Formal Feeling" by Zibby Oneal; (2) "IOU's" by Ouida Sebestyen; (3) "Chapters: My Growth as a Writer" by Lois Duncan; and (4) "Me Me Me Me: Not a Novel" by M.E. Kerr. (DC)

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YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

This past year has been a good one for young adult literature. A number of the better writers in the field have published new books that live up to the best work they have done in the past. Two of these are discussed below—the first by the author of *The Language of Goldfish*, the second by the author of *Words by Heart* and *Far from Home*.

A Formal Feeling by Zibby Oneal (Viking, 1982)

Summary

This is the story of a young woman's grief for her dead mother, her bewilderment over the woman her father has chosen for his second wife, and her discovery of the true character of her mother. When the book opens, Anne Cameron is returning home from boarding school for the Christmas holiday. A year ago her mother died unexpectedly, and Anne has not fully recovered from her sense of loss. Her mother had played a major part in her life, as a friend and companion, but most of all as an ideal toward which Anne strove. Anne's father has remarried. His new wife, Dory, a secretary at the university where he is a professor, is warm and gentle but unsophisticated. She is the opposite of Anne's mother in every way, and Anne cannot understand her father's choice. On this, her first visit home since her mother's death, Anne finds that she is strangely without emotion, the "formal feeling" of the title. This expression, one that serves to describe well the subtle state that Oneal portrays in this novel, is taken from a poem by Emily Dickinson that begins, "After great pain, a formal feeling comes."

As the family prepares for Christmas and Anne shops for presents, she begins to reexamine the image of her mother that she carries and to sense that her mother's perfection can be interpreted in several ways. She recalls that her mother, often loving and caring, also demanded admiration, set impossibly high standards for Anne, and was intolerant of weakness in others. She remembers that her mother once left the family for several years and was sometimes cold, ambitious, and selfish. With this insight—really a remembering of what she had known but suppressed—the "formal feeling" breaks, and Anne rediscovers her father's love.

Evaluation

A Formal Feeling is a sensitive book, genuine and natural in style, convincing in what it tells us about people. It is what might be called a feminine novel. Not a book written for women—though high school boys will probably not read it—*A Formal Feeling* is about feminine feelings and attitudes and is written in a style that conveys a feminine tone. This quality is, in fact, one of its strengths.

Like most books that center on a teenage character unlikely to have the richness of experience that older characters have, *A Formal Feeling* lacks variety. Only Anne is a round character, but the genuineness of her feelings and the puzzle that focuses on her mother carry along the reader. It is to Oneal's credit that she reveals the solution to this puzzle with subtlety. She emphasizes not the fact that Anne's mother turns out to have been other than Anne's memory of her but that Anne did, in fact, always know that her mother's perfection was an artificial matter created by "formal feeling." Because of this subtlety, the final chapters require careful attention if Anne's rediscovery is to be understood.

In the last few years, many publishers have begun to bring out series of romances for young girls. These books have come under severe criticism because of the stereotypes of girls and women they contain. Without entering into that controversy, let me suggest that *A Formal Feeling*, although in no sense a "girls' romance," may be the perfect book to persuade a student who seems to want to read nothing but romances that a novel can provide insight into human emotions while satisfying a reader's need for a book that is deeply moving.

IOU's by Ouida Sebestyen (Little, Brown, 1982)

Summary

Annie Garrett, left by her husband and without alimony, has struggled to care for her child, Stowe. A nonconformist who drives a battered old pickup named "Horseless," she has raised a son who is a delight to know. Just entering adolescence, Stowe maintains a boyish life with a friend, Brownie, but is both attracted to and offended by the girl across the street, a girl who used to be "one of the boys" but is now a bit ahead of them.

Stowe's mother, we learn, has received news that her father, from whom she has been estranged since her marriage, has suffered a heart attack. Terribly upset by the news, Annie would like to visit him. Stowe cannot understand why his mother does not hate her father as he hates his; and this lack of understanding forms one of the major themes of the book.

Stowe receives a telephone call from an uncle who tells him that his grandfather has asked for him: not for Stowe *and* his mother, just for Stowe. The boy conceals the call from his mother because he doesn't want to hurt her but also because he doesn't want to complicate their lives. As the story unfolds, every event seems to be related to the summons from Stowe's grandfather. Finally, Annie decides to risk a visit to her father. Stowe nearly refuses to go, but he has determined not to hurt his mother as have the other two men in her life. They arrive too late, and Stowe realizes with horror that by not telling his mother of the phone call he has kept her from seeing her father before his death. Annie disagrees: "It wasn't you. I could have called. I could have asked questions, and pawned things, and *come*. But I was waiting to be asked for." The novel ends as Annie and Stowe set out for home. In the car, Stowe reveals that he is thinking about trying to find his father so that the years of separation between them will not end as they have with Annie and her father.

Evaluation

Through dialogue and action and Stowe's thoughts and feelings, Sebestyen makes vivid two people whose love and regard for each other are memorable. Stowe's desire not to hurt Annie as other men have done and his ambivalent feelings about his grandfather's summons form the principal conflict of the novel. Despite its seeming simplicity, the story is rich in relationships and conflicting feelings which Sebestyen illuminates with perception and gentleness. There is little plot, but Stowe's inner conflict and the odd, often amusing details of his life with Annie serve well as a substitute. And the characters, even minor ones like Tyler and Yetta, the children Annie cares for during the day, are a delight.

IOU's gives attention to human relationships, and this theme makes it ideal for discussion by students. Although Stowe is barely into middle school, the novel will tempt older readers to examine the meaning of their own relationships to parents and friends. Like Katherine Paterson's *The Bridge to Terabithia*, this novel refutes the belief that teenagers read only about characters their own age or older. By asking us to understand Stowe, the book forces us to question the value of pride and reveals the sterility of alienation. So simple in style that nearly any student will be able to read it, the book's charm will win over most readers. Subtle and personal, it is a book like M. E. Kerr's *Gentlehands*, one of the few recent young adult novels that work for general class reading and discussion.

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YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Novelists Turn to Autobiography

All of us agree that nonfiction is literature: biographies and autobiographies, short essays, humorous essays, travel literature, even history when it is written with the art of a Winston Churchill, and books like *Kon-Tiki* that are difficult to categorize. But the way we teach such works is usually more limited than the treatment we give to fiction. We ask students what an author of an essay is saying and, if they understand it, whether or not they agree. There the discussion usually ends. Biographies and autobiographies present even greater problems. What are the standards for judging biographical writing? How does one make a biography of Keats interesting to a class of tenth-graders? How does one judge the story of a life when it is told by the person who lived it? Also, unfortunately, few biographies and autobiographies look very much at the teenage years of their subjects. After all, the real triumphs occurred later.

Recently, two of the best and most popular novelists for young adults have written autobiographies centered on their teenage years. Both books fit nicely into the literature and the composition dimensions of English. One is by Lois Duncan and the other by M. E. Kerr.

***Chapters: My Growth as a Writer* by Lois Duncan (Little, Brown, 1982)**

Lois Duncan has never written routine young adult novels. *Killing Mr. Griffin*, for example, describes the death of a teacher caused by a group of students. *Daughters of Eve* is a vicious and unpleasant but effective novel about girls who revenge themselves on the world of the school, their homes, their boyfriends. In *Chapters*, she describes her development as a writer from her first childish story to her first published novel. She combines details from her childhood, her teenage years, her marriage and divorce, with the writing she did during those years. Stories that she wrote at twelve and sixteen and twenty-two are included as are poems from those years. Surrounding them are remembrances of her relationship with her mother, her college years, the boys she dated. The juxtaposition is fascinating.

Students who have read her novels will, of course, want to read *Chapters*. But other students, especially those who rarely read fiction, will be able to see at once that this book is worth exploring. They will be able to laugh at the flaws in her early poems and perhaps wonder about a poem that they might write about a similar experience. The stories will touch them, even as Duncan herself looks critically at her early work and sees its failures.

I can think of no book that could contribute more to a creative writing class, but any English class could look at it to see how a writer develops, whether or not members of the class think of themselves as prospective writers. Students can be urged to write poems and stories on subjects similar to Duncan's, subjects that any student will understand—love of parents, jealousy of sisters, love for other boys or girls, the failure of love. Although Duncan was obviously a talented teenage writer, she often wrote less than splendidly and admits her failures. Middle school and high school students can recognize their own successes and failures in her writing. First, I would ask students to read *Killing Mr. Griffin*, then *Chapters*, and finally *Daughters of Eve*. With that preparation, I feel sure that even the most inhibited students in my class would discover material for wonderful (if not technically perfect) poems and stories.

***Me Me Me Me: Not a Novel* by M. E. Kerr (Harper & Row, 1983)**

Kerr, author of the splendid *Gentlehands* and *The Son of Someone Famous*, has written the story of her life from ten until the publication of her first story in 1951. She begins the book by observing that many of her readers have asked whether or not she gets her ideas from her own life. This book is her answer.

Me is a more complete autobiography than is *Chapters*. It depicts Kerr's adolescence in a series of well-developed, fictionalized scenes. The style is breezy, and she finds humor even in the more embarrassing events. In order to step aside occasionally to comment on her life, Kerr has set a number of short sections in a type different from that of the rest of the book. In these sections, she discusses people and events in her life that she later used in her young adult novels. For anyone familiar with her novels, these discussions are intriguing.

Because the style is light and the book quick moving, students will have no problems reading it, although they may need help with some of the references to the Second World War. Many of the scenes and characters in *Me* are ones that can serve as writing models for students, models that demonstrate how much can be made of relatively simple events within the reach of most student writers. Kerr helps students to see where writers get their ideas and to realize that nearly every part of their lives can inspire a story. *Me* should help to eliminate the "But I don't have anything to write about" whine that we hear so often.

These two autobiographies need to become a part of literature and composition programs. For students from the sixth through the tenth or eleventh grades, each book has much to offer—as literature and as a guide to the nature of writing. Used in conjunction with novels by Duncan and Kerr, *Chapters* and *Me* make for an exciting unit on writing and writers.

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